

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 007389

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/19/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: THE BJP CONTINUES ITS DOWNWARD SPIRAL

REF: A. NEW DELHI 7088

[1](#)B. NEW DELHI 6998

[1](#)C. NEW DELHI 6606

[1](#)D. CHENNAI 1418

Classified By: PolCouns Geoffrey Pyatt, Reasons 1.4 (B,D).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Former DPM LK Advani has failed to quell the powerful centrifugal forces that threaten to tear apart the BJP and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and the party is continuing a downward spiral that threatens to doom its immediate electoral chances. The Sangh Parivar (family of Hindu organizations) insists that the BJP return to Hindutva, while party pragmatists argue for a development-oriented election strategy. The BJP's secular NDA allies, who want no part of Hindutva, are increasingly disaffected, contributing to growing rumors of future defections to the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Former PM Vajpayee is in poor health and has faded from active politics, and the aging Advani is no longer the "iron man." The lack of a clear successor to these two BJP standard-bearers has set off growing battles between the party's second tier leadership, personified by the flamboyant and erratic behavior of the former Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh (MP) Uma Bharti. The BJP needs electoral success to revive, but the prospects are not good. Continued defeats will tempt the party to increasingly resort to a hard line and irresponsible rhetoric, including on issues of US/India relations. End Summary.

Back to the Future

[1](#)2. (C) The past six months have seen the unremitting decline of the BJP. Prior to the May parliamentary contest, Party standard-bearer and then Deputy PM LK Advani staked his reputation on a nationwide tour aimed at invigorating grass-roots support. Not only did it fail to inspire, but the BJP lost power, falling to only 10 Lok Sabha seats from its previous 32 in the key Hindi heartland state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Party morale plummeted and BJP front organizations, such as the Youth Wing became moribund. When the party failed to knock the Congress/Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) combine from power in the Maharashtra state election in early October, it replaced Party President Venkaiah Naidu with Advani, in hopes that he would reverse the trend.

[1](#)3. (C) Advani assumed the leadership of a deeply divided party. Factionalism became rampant after the electoral defeats. Advani has waited six years to become PM, but with his party in the political wilderness, there is little prospect for a quick return to power. This has invigorated the party's second tier leadership, who began to openly fight over the top spots. Tasked with ending the squabbling, restoring party discipline, and working with the secular parties in the NDA to win upcoming state elections in Bihar, Jharkhand, and Haryana, Advani has made little progress, despite his best efforts.

Uma as Figurehead

[1](#)4. (C) The BJP's problems are personified in the behavior and fortunes of Uma Bharti, the former Chief Minister of MP. Bharti, an OBC (other backward caste), is renowned for her ability to rouse the masses. In a party dominated by upper castes, she is largely distrusted by the leadership, both for her low caste background and erratic personality. Advani has long patronized Bharti in the hope that she could increase popular support and broaden the BJP's narrow caste base, but she remains notoriously unstable and unpredictable.

[1](#)5. (C) Bharti resigned as MP Chief Minister following her indictment in an old public order case in October. Although the BJP rallied around her and openly supported her subsequent "flag march" around India, press reports and BJP contacts confirm that she had made a mess of the state administration and the party was happy to see her depart. Upon taking over the party presidency, Advani continued to patronize Bharti, making her one of the six BJP general secretaries. On November 10, the newly-selected BJP

SIPDIS

leadership met for the first time in front of television cameras. Advani began to complain of "indiscipline" in the

party ranks, chiding Bharti for her public criticism of senior leader Pramod Mahajan, and other BJP leaders.

¶6. (U) In one of India's more sensational "tabloid TV style" rows, Bharti then told Advani that she was the victim of a smear campaign orchestrated by unnamed BJP leaders in the Rajya Sabha, who "did not have to face the voters," and that she was forced to "defend my reputation." When Advani said the matter was "closed," Bharti refused to yield the floor and marched out, daring Advani to discipline her. The publicly humiliated BJP triumvirate of Advani, Vajpayee and Jaswant Singh then dropped Bharti from the leadership and suspended her party membership.

Hindutva Losing its Luster

¶7. (C) Since the BJP/NDA has been out of power, the hard-line wing of the Sangh Parivar has been reasserting itself, making repeated calls for a return to Hindutva. Advani, who is well-aware that the RSS supplies the disciplined base for what is an increasingly undisciplined party, has attempted to mollify the hard-liners. Upon being named to the presidency, Advani assured party workers that a Ram temple would be built in Ayodhya, and attended the hard-line RSS leadership meeting in Hardwar on November 6. Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) leader Pravin Togodia told the press that he was not happy with Advani's actions and that the party must return to Hindutva not in "months, but days." Togodia, other VHP leaders, and RSS leader KS Sudarshan showed their displeasure with Advani by staying away from the Hardwar meeting.

¶8. (C) Advani has not only failed to reassure the Sangh Parivar, but has alienated the BJP's secular NDA allies, who are increasingly alarmed at a possible Hindutva revival. Sections of the Bihar-based Janata Dal United (JD-U), headed by George Fernandes, are calling for it to leave the NDA and join the ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) before the February 2005 elections. Such a move could set off an exodus from the NDA, as other secular partners decide to switch sides. On November 8, the JD-U passed a resolution reminding the BJP that it had joined the NDA only after its Hindutva planks were removed from the alliance platform. Saying that it would "never compromise with religious bigotry," the JD-U said it was fully prepared to "take another road" if the BJP rekindled Hindutva. Advani met with the NDA leadership on November 15 and, in what most analysts saw as a BJP retreat from Hindutva, issued a joint statement that there should be a "negotiated settlement" of the Ayodhya dispute.

¶9. (SBU) In another indicator of the ongoing decline of Hindutva, on November 12, the Tamil Nadu state government indicted Sri Jayendra Saraswathi, a powerful Hindu religious leader, on murder charges (Reftel D). Although the governing party in Tamil Nadu, the AIDMK, is part of the NDA, Chief Minister Jayalalitha told reporters on November 17 that "all are equal before the law," and assured them she would proceed with the case. Although the Sangh Parivar decried the arrest as an "assault against Hinduism," its efforts to organize public protests have largely been ignored and public reaction muted.

A Potential Split

¶10. (C) The Sangh Parivar has long threatened to leave the BJP and create a Bharatiya Hindutva Party (BHP). Hard-liners within the Sangh Parivar are the principal proponents of such a split, arguing that a secularized BJP could then pursue a pragmatic development-oriented agenda based on the "water, roads, power" slogan, leaving the BHP with the Hindutva agenda. The BHP would then join the NDA and work out seat adjustments and cooperative arrangements with the BJP. These theorists contend that when the two vastly disparate ideologies are freed of the constant tension of belonging to the same party, they will be able to work together in harmony and create a broad-based coalition to bring the NDA back to power in New Delhi. The Sangh Parivar has repeatedly paraded the BHP idea whenever it does not get its way on BJP decisions, and few take the idea seriously. Should the BJP's electoral fortunes continue to decline, however, prospects of a schism will increase.

Views of a BJP Insider

¶11. (C) On November 17, BJP National Executive Member and RSS leader Seshadri Chari told Poloff that he was not worried about these seemingly ominous developments. Chari claimed that the NDA was far more united and effective than the UPA, pointing out that the Left/Communists claim to support the UPA but act more like an opposition. He observed that Congress and the BJP essentially agree on economic liberalization and most foreign policy issues, including the need for closer ties with the US, while the Left opposes

practically everything the UPA stands for. Chari argued that this arrangement is inherently unstable, could come apart at any time, and that Congress should be worried about the UPA's survival. According to Chari, these problems are far more serious than those plaguing the BJP/NDA.

112. (C) Chari confided that the RSS wanted Naidu to remain as BJP President and was opposed to Advani's accession. He contended that Advani, along with Vajpayee, is the most prestigious and powerful BJP leader and the party's "trump card." The RSS argued that pushing him into the top slot was premature and unwarranted, as it makes the party's problems seem more severe than they actually are. In Chari's view, Advani has restored discipline, and convinced the BJP's second tier leaders that he is "the first among equals." He dismissed press reporting about Bharti, saying that the party never issued a formal suspension order, she had sent a letter of apology to Advani, and that she would be quietly reintegrated into the hierarchy. Chari also denied that Hindutva was an issue, claiming that Indian nationalism and Hindutva are one and the same, and that the "time for Ram temple politics has passed." He predicted that with these problems resolved, the BJP would assume the role of an active and vigorous opposition party.

113. (C) Chari was less sanguine about BJP electoral prospects, admitting that it would be "difficult" for the party to do well in the upcoming state elections in Haryana, Bihar, and Jharkhand. Admitting that UPA ally Laloo Prasad Yadav was well-entrenched in his state, Chari noted that the "anti-incumbency factor" could hand Bihar to the BJP and its JD-U allies. In Jharkhand, the BJP is the incumbent and fighting alone against a powerful combination of Congress and the tribal-based JMM party. In Haryana, Chari hoped that the BJP could entice the ruling Indian National Lok Dal (INLD) back into the NDA to recapture the state. He conceded that should the BJP lose Jharkhand and fail to recapture the other two states, it would be a clean sweep for the Congress/UPA, and a crushing blow to the BJP, with long-term political implications. Chari's hopes for a revived BJP/INLD alliance seem to have come to naught, as the BJP announced on November 17 that it would contest the Haryana elections alone.

Comment

114. (C) The BJP is in trouble. The party's principal figurehead, former PM Vajpayee, is rapidly aging and will soon leave active politics. Advani has long waited for his chance to become PM, but his age is also catching up with him. The Party has not groomed a successor to these two stalwarts, and it is not clear that any BJP second tier leader has the gravitas and popular appeal of Vajpayee and Advani, and can supply the necessary counterweight to the growing popularity of Sonia Gandhi and her children. Personality clashes between ambitious second tier aspirants have only been contained for the time being, and the Sangh Parivar's determination to pursue Hindutva is contributing to growing disaffection among the NDA allies. Advani, once the "iron man" of Indian politics, might earlier have resolved these problems. Now, however he has only papered over the centrifugal forces that threaten to break apart the BJP and the NDA. If the BJP/NDA does badly in upcoming elections, all bets are off, and the chances will grow that the BJP will stake out an increasingly hard line and irresponsible positions on issues of importance to the US, like economic reform, Indo-Pak relations, and the US-India partnership.

BLAKE